

# Wood and Wonder

## Carpenter Ed O'Donnell Finds New Beauty in Old Places

By Laura Collins-Hughes

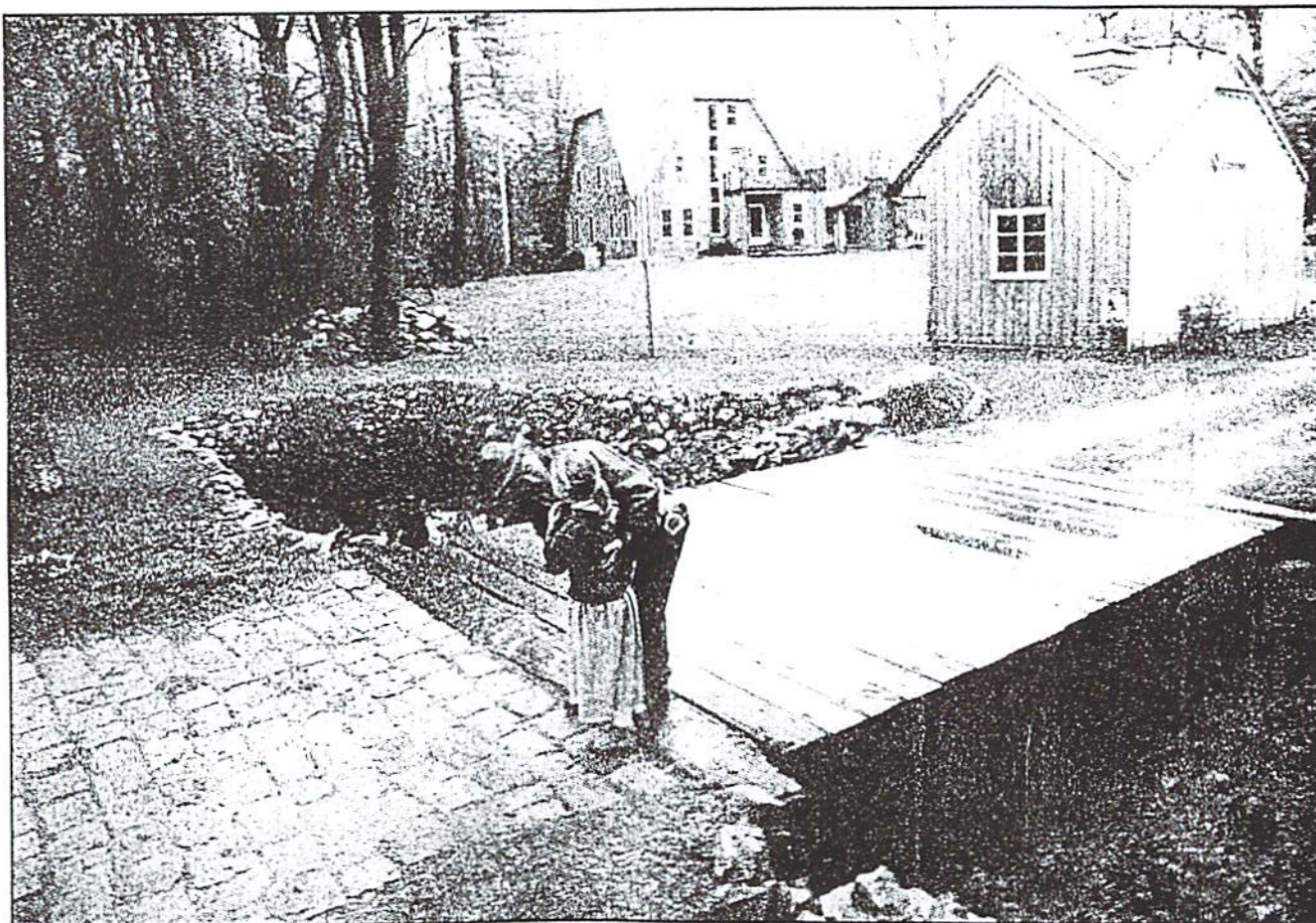
Ed O'Donnell looks at wood and sees possibilities.

His imagination does just fine if it happens to be new, clean wood. But if it's old and maybe salt-soaked or charred or possibly even bullet-scarred, if he had to drag it up from the beach or travel miles to find it, that's when his mind races into high gear.

"I don't know what the drive is," he says, "but I just love when you find something somebody didn't want anymore and put it back in service."

Perhaps the most telling incident occurred the day, years ago, when he was building a house at Gurnet. He looked across the water and saw workers dismantling the old Powder Point Bridge. He decided it was wood he wanted to use, and he bought the old beams by the hundreds.

"I got into those sticks," says the 36-year-old carpenter and builder, relishing the memory even as some of the beams sit in his back yard, awaiting their transformation. "They were so cool."



*Bryan O'Donnell, 8, leaves for school in the morning as her carpenter father, Ed, leaves for work. The pair stand on the bridge in their driveway, made by Ed O'Donnell from pieces of the Powder Point Bridge. Their house, in the background, also is made from pieces of the bridge.*

Staff Photo by Chris Bernstein

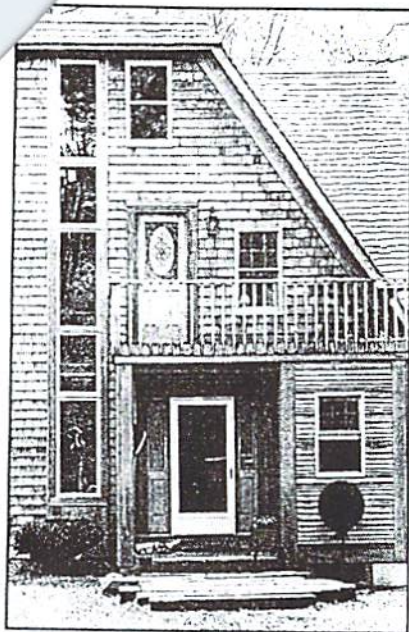
He built his first bridge beam room in the house at Gurnet, using wood from the bridge to construct a light-filled space with a steeply pitched high ceiling and exposed

beams. The new Powder Point Bridge is visible through the window. The design of the room is modern, but the flavor of the past is in the wood.

So it is with O'Donnell's own house, but more so. Everything about the house, where he lives with his wife, Laurie, and their children, 10-

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A cutaway of the front of the O'Donnell home, built by Ed O'Donnell using beams from the old Powder Point Bridge.



Ed O'Donnell sizes up a knothole in some oak floorboards. If the knothole isn't there naturally, he's willing to cut one to fit to give the wood the right feel.

## O'Donnell

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year-old Billy and 8-year-old Bryan, is more so. In most homes, that fact that there is a swimming pool out back would be notable. At the O'Donnells' three-story home on Union Street, where the driveway begins with a miniature bridge made from Powder Point Bridge beams, a mere pool barely registers as an afterthought.

Not so with the fish pond, which nestles under the stairway in the front hall. As Laurie O'Donnell tells it, her husband built the stone pond one night, coming in with two wheelbarrows of rocks five minutes before they were supposed to be somewhere.

"I said, 'What are you doing?' He said, 'I'm gonna build a fish pond.' I said, 'OK, but you gotta hurry.'"

Bathed in warm light from its many windows and mirrors, the house is a mon-

ument to Ed O'Donnell's creativity. Beams from the bridge are used liberally — in the ceilings, in the window sills. In the living room, the walls are made of walnut; the parquet floors are teak. Toward the doorway, the wood is pecan, and in the hallway it's ash.

"More woods than the forest in here," O'Donnell remarks, showing a visitor around. "Eclectic is probably the right word, 'cause it's just a conglomeration of different weird parts."

But it is a conglomeration of different exquisitely crafted parts. O'Donnell, the son of a Marshfield builder, is nothing if not a perfectionist.

"It makes me a little tough to live with and a little tough to deal with," he says. "I see too good. I see what's going on with everything, and nobody else does."

Recently, he had a friend help him out with his current job, but his friend simply didn't measure up, and he had to let him

go.

"It's too delicate," he says of the job, building two large additions to a Duxbury home he worked on several years ago. "Every part of that molding and stuff, it makes a cohesive statement. When you're putting it up, if you don't feel what you're going for ... then you can't do it. You just have to feel it. I know what parts matter to my eye when I'm doing it."

The job, which he has been working on since December 1994, demands that he make the new work look old. It is a challenge he embraces.

There are, for example, the handmade transoms with their panes of antique glass — the sort of glass he says he has "a mountain of" at home.

"I love that glass," he says, looking up at it. "The irregularity of it, the not-off-the-shelf feeling. It just feels old. It feels like it's come of age, made it through, endured."

That is at least as true of the ship's mast that serves as the center pole in a spiraling, three-story tower that is part of the addition. Dark and gleaming now, it shows no traces of the bullet-scarred wreck it used to be.

O'Donnell had been determined to use a ship's mast for the tower, and the fact that he couldn't find one didn't deter him.

"So I got in my truck, and I went to every wet driveway between here and New Bedford," he says.

Having had no luck, he was leaving the very last place when a kid came out and told him he'd overheard that O'Donnell was looking for a mast. His father, a tugboat operator, might have just the thing, he said.

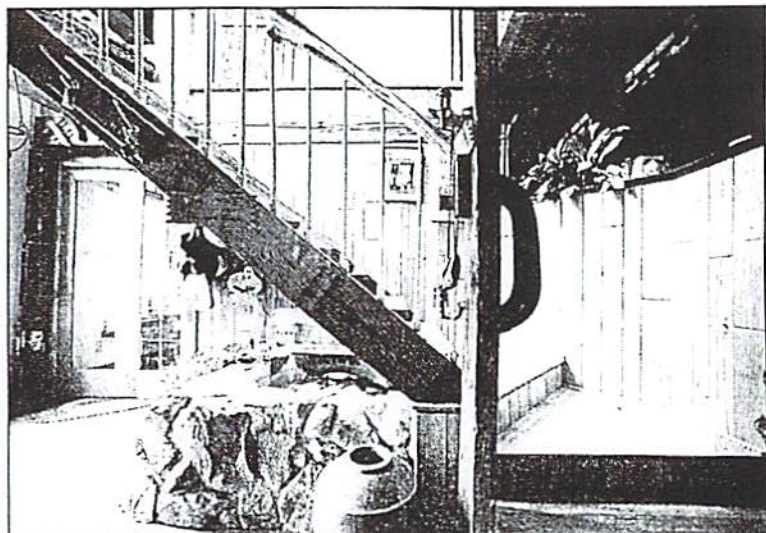
So he drove to Rochester, into the woods, "and here, laying across a bunch of barrels, is the perfect stick," O'Donnell says. "I could tell."

That despite the fact that the mast, from an early 1900s fishing ship, was covered with paint a quarter-inch thick, had been used for target practice and was pocked with shotgun holes.

"The bullets stopped just short of the piece of wood I needed," O'Donnell says.

Now it is the focal point of the stairway, whose steps are made from mahogany O'Donnell found through the classifieds "for

Staff Photos by Chris Bernstein



The O'Donnells' front stairway, complete with stone fish pond underneath.



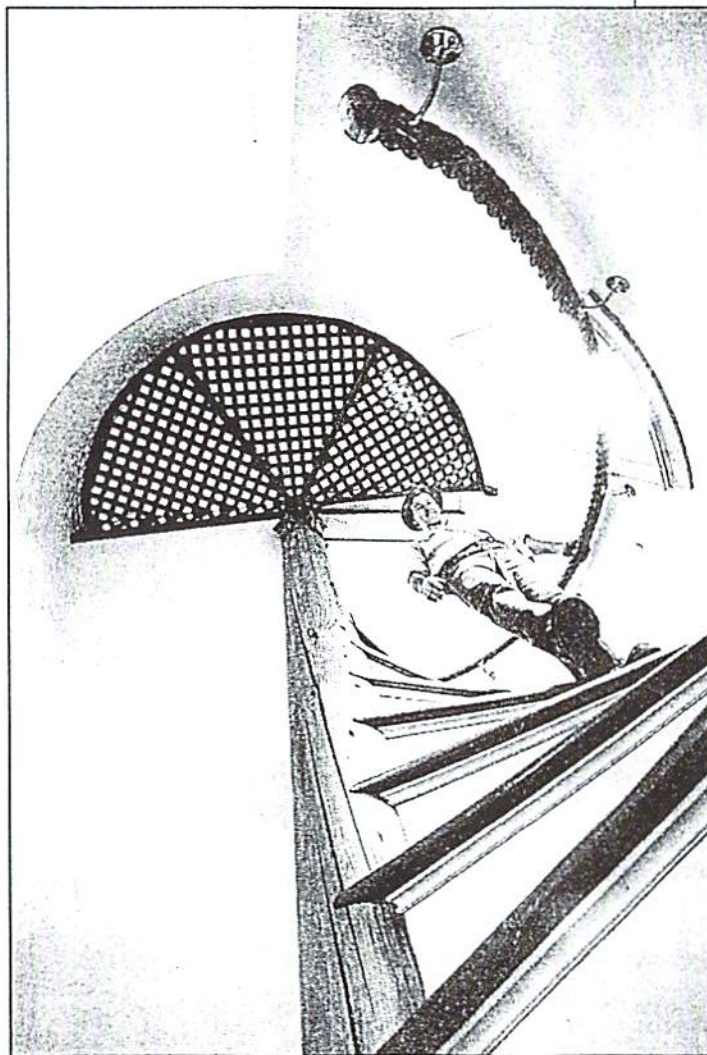
less money than you'd pay for pine."

The classifieds, auctions, the town dump, the beach — all are treasure troves for this carpenter.

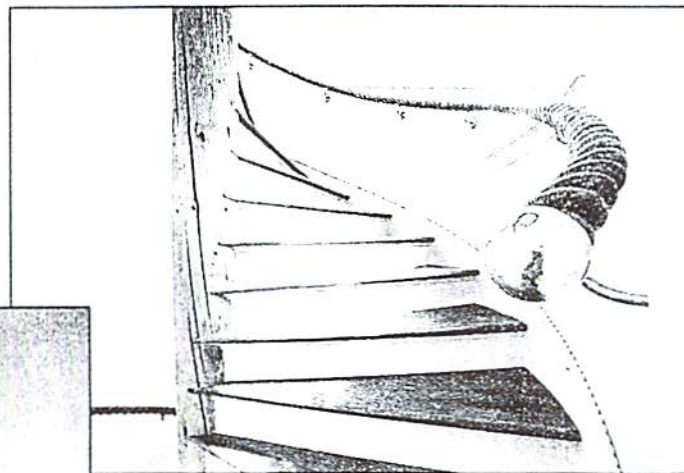
"Sometimes I hold my breath when he says he's going to the dump, 'cause I think, 'Oh, God, where are we going to put everything?'" Laurie O'Donnell says.

But her husband is a man on a mission, and the more discards he can find beauty in, the happier he is.

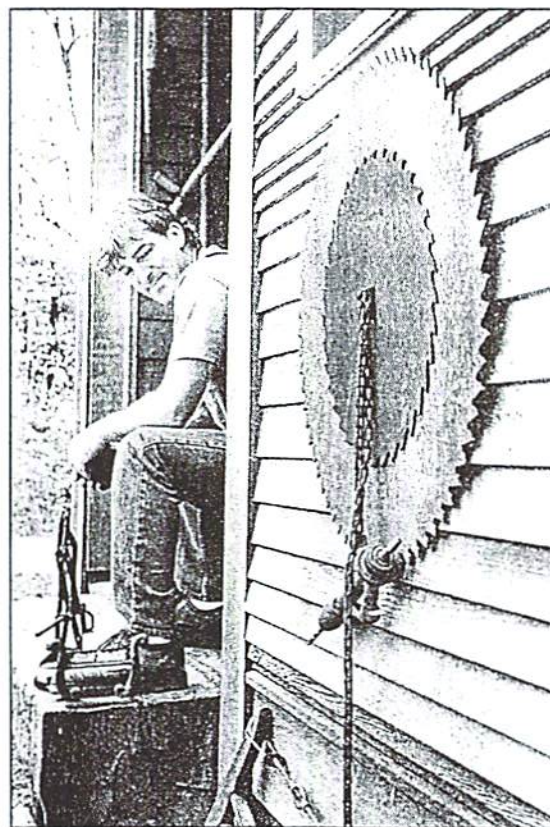
"I love to save things that would otherwise go to ruin," he says. "I like to see the diamond in the stone."



Ed O'Donnell walks down the mahogany stairs of a nearly completed, three-story tower he is building as part of an addition for a Duxbury customer. A lattice-work floor on the top level allows light into the bedroom below.



A resin-coated rope, once the dock line on the battleship Massachusetts, is now the tower's railing, accented with polished brass.



Ed O'Donnell rests in the front doorway of his home.